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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning refers to small-group instruction that incorporates five elements: clear, positive interdependence among students; group self-evaluation; interpersonal behaviors that promote each member's learning; individual accountability; and frequent use of small-group social skills. These elements have been implemented in colleges across the country. "As Worlds Collide," a culture and community course at Central Arizona College, has combined history, social psychology, and communications studies. Learning outcomes have included improved writing and social skills and awareness of others' values and beliefs. In a science literacy course at Indiana's Ivy Tech State College, active, problem-based learning and critical thinking skills were taught. Responses to student surveys indicated enthusiasm for the teaching method. New Jersey's Brookdale Community College enhanced a public speaking course with group activities related to research and presenting speeches. While post-course surveys found that teachers felt that none of the anticipated benefits had accrued, students felt that the course helped reduce performance anxiety. Kansas Community College also undertook a study of collaborative sociology and psychology courses, finding no significant differences between grades among 50 students in collaborative courses and 100 in traditional classes. Finally, the "History of Western Civilization" course at Alabama's Calhoun Community College used collaborative learning and learning contracts. Students responded positively but many failed to meet their own set goals. While collaborative learning may be an effective teaching method, meeting teacher and student expectations depends upon program structure and student participation. (JDI)

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Digest

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Collaborative Learning in Community Colleges

by Elizabeth Foote

Collaborative learning strategies offer promising possibilities for promoting active learning and student self-reliance in community college classrooms. This Digest defines collaborative learning and then discusses five experimental courses that have incorporated collaborative learning.

What is collaborative learning?

Collaborative learning is the instructional use of small groups. Its goal is to allow students to work together to maximize their own and other's learning. The traditional teacher's role is expanded to include facilitating and coordinating the student groups, which then assume part of the responsibility for instruction. There are five essential components that must be present for small-group learning to be truly collaborative:

- clear, positive interdependence among students
- regular group self-evaluation
- interpersonal behaviors that promote each member's learning and success
- individual accountability and personal responsibility
- frequent use of appropriate interpersonal and small group social skills

Collaborative learning is not simply putting students in groups to learn; rather, it is structured cooperation among students (Johnson et al, 1991). These principles were used in the five courses described below.

"As Worlds Collide"

At Central Arizona College, a team of three instructors taught "As Worlds Collide," a nine-unit learning community that combined history, social psychology, and communication studies to explore questions of culture and community. The forty-seven students participated in a variety of learning activities, including the formation of teams of six or seven students to present instruction to the class and the establishment of student discussion seminars that encouraged the development of self-guided learning teams. Instructors were present, but not as leaders or active participants. Portfolio assessment was used; each student accumulated class and discussion notes and wrote three papers.

Learning outcomes included improved writing skills through class discussion, writing assignments and the use of journals, improved social skills through group activities, increased student recognition of their own improved academic performance, and developed awareness of others' values, culture, and beliefs. The students appreciated the relaxed atmosphere, the opportunity to speak freely, and the variety of teaching strategies. The teachers found that a learning community was workable in a rural community college that serves a population of varied ages, ethnicities, and academic preparedness (Isbell, 1996).

Science Literacy

To make science meaningful to non-science majors, at the Wabash Valley Region campus of Ivy Tech State College in Indiana, a project was undertaken to modify the traditional survey coverage of broad areas of science to explore a series of focused problems in science from physics, chemistry, geology, and meteorology. For each area, a brief background lecture was given. Then students formed groups of two or three to gather more information, discuss current scientific thinking, and determine what sort of actions they might take, both as individuals and as a society, in response to the issues. After the discussion, students wrote position papers. Each unit ended with a test (some tests were group efforts).

Topics included hazardous waste disposal, nuclear terrorism, the greenhouse effect, acid rain, and depletion of the ozone layer. The course promoted active, problem-based learning and taught critical thinking skills. Student survey responses noted enthusiasm and satisfaction with the instructional method, and several students continued to research current events in science on their own (Shotwell, 1996).

"Effective Speech"

To enhance student outcomes, Brookdale Community College in New Jersey experimented with incorporating collaborative learning strategies into their basic public speaking course. Group activities, such as researching and delivering group informative speeches and peer assistance with individual assignments were added, while the

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number of graded speech performances was reduced. The grading system changed, with points given for participation in group activities. The goals were to increase students' ability to work in groups, aid their appreciation for cultural diversity, improve their problem solving skills, and enhance their ability to access information and utilize technology.

A post-course survey found that teachers felt that none of the anticipated benefits had significantly accrued, and there was only a slight increase in problem solving skills and group work ability. However, they thought that the new method gave them more time to work with each student. Students were enthusiastic about the reduction of performance anxiety and they liked working in groups. Given these results, the Speech Department plans to continue to use collaborative learning strategies (Hunter, 1996).

Introduction to Sociology and Psychology

To determine if cooperative learning strategies were effective in improving teaching quality and enhancing the learning process of students, a study was conducted at Kansas City, Kansas Community College. Outcomes were compared for four courses: experimental introductory sociology and psychology courses that used cooperative learning, and introductory psychology and sociology courses that used more traditional methods.

The experimental courses involved small (4-5 students) group learning activities such as discussions, problem-solving, and study reviews, as well as textbook reading and a final examination. Each student acted as the leader, the time-keeper, and the recorder on a rotating basis. The traditional teaching methods in the control groups included lectures, large-group discussions, study guide assignments, textbook reading, and a final examination. An analysis of the final course grade for the fifty experimental group students and one hundred control group students found no significant differences in grades. However, the student comments in the course evaluations were much more positive from the cooperative learners (Wilson, 1996).

"History of Western Civilization"

At Calhoun Community College in Huntsville, Alabama, an innovative curriculum that combined collaborative learning and contracting was tested on two sections of the History of Western Civilization class. Each student agreed to a "student learning plan" that set forth a grade as a goal with objectives (tests, book reports, and papers) that enabled him or her to meet the goal. Collaborative learning strategies were used in the small group study sessions held before each test.

The students responded very positively to the group work and to the overall curriculum. However, 79% of the students in one section and 50% of the students in the second failed to meet their goals. The teacher concluded that while students recognize the value of setting goals, they may not be able to follow their own contracts (Harris, 1993).

Conclusion

Collaborative learning allows students and faculty to share responsibility for learning. It helps prepare students for workplaces that increasingly value self-motivated, self-confident, team-oriented employees (Cooke, 1994). However, depending on the structure of the program and the level of student participation, teacher expectations and increased student performance may not be met. Nonetheless, a collaborative learning strategy can be a useful addition to the repertoire of teaching methods used in community colleges.

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